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Revisiting SAARC: A Perspective from Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has not been emerged as an effective regional organization such as the EU and ASEAN. Despite taking several initiatives in this regard, it has not achieved the desired objectives set for at the time of its establishment. Over the thirty years it has become hostage chiefly by the Pakistan-India antagonistic relationship. On the basis of interviews of the Key Informant (KIs) this article investigates the causes for the lack of momentum of SAARC and explores the prospects for SAARC as vibrant economic group of the South Asian nations. Furthermore, the study finds that lack of implementation of SAARC declarations, conflicting issues between India and other neighbouring countries and strict SAARC visa regime are important barriers in enhancement of regional co-operation in South Asia. The article recommends that SAARC countries may enhance regional cooperation by managing bilateral conflicts particularly between Pakistan-India. The article also discovers that bilateral economic co-operation between Pakistan and India has spillover effect on the enhancement of regional economic cooperation in South Asia.

Key Words Regionalism, SAARC, ASEAN, Pakistan-India, Regional Economic Cooperation.

SAARC as Economic Framework

South Asian countries started the process of regional cooperation in South Asia due to the Bangladesh President Ziaur Rahman's persuasion about regional cooperation. After a couple of meetings of foreign secretaries of the countries of South Asian region, a meeting of the Foreign Ministers was held in New Delhi on 1-2 August 1983. The delegates decided to adopt a Declaration on South Asian Regional Cooperation, which established basic objectives and principles for regional cooperation in South Asia and recommended some core institutional and financial arrangements. This 1983 Declaration is a significant document in the evolution of SAARC as, what Lawrence Sáez observes that 'many section of the 1983 Declaration were copied literally in the SAARC Charter (Sáez, 2011). Seven South Asian countries namely Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives and Sri Lanka gathered in Dhaka, Bangladesh and agreed to establish an organization known as South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) (*SAARC Charter*, 1985) on 8 December 1985. Kathmandu was selected as SAARC headquarters. Afghanistan was added to SAARC as the eighth formal member in November 2005. Moreover, Australia, China, Iran, Japan, USA,

Myanmar, Mauritius and South Korea are the countries that currently enjoy the status of observer. While an intergovernmental institution- European Union also holds the observer status in it.

SAARC leaders agreed to take all decisions at all levels on the basis of unanimity. It is pertinent to mention here that SAARC Charter under its article X prohibits member countries to discuss bilateral and contentious issues at this forum (*SAARC Charter*, 1985). The leaders of SAARC countries also decided to hold the Summit annually at the level of the Heads of State or Government at the location on rotation basis. The leaders also committed to promote peace and harmony among member states for the welfare of their masses.

The SAARC was a good opening for regional economic cooperation but with very aspiring objectives. However, SAARC member states could not maintain the aspirations that they manifested at the start of SAARC initiative. Resultantly, SAARC became a lukewarm organization with the objective of making declarations only. Reasons behind the lack of success of SAARC can be explained in the following section.

Methodology

The key research objective of the study is to gauge prospects for enhancement of regional economic cooperation among SAARC countries which can only be guaranteed by increasing the Pakistan-India bilateral trade and economic relations. The Pakistan-India conflict has dominated the region and its intricacies have increased after the overt nuclearization of South Asia in May 1998. SAARC has carried out several initiatives and concluded different agreements, but geo-political stumbling blocks among its members particularly between Pakistan and India have not allowed it to achieve the desired objectives. In this context, SAARC needs another approach. Therefore, this study focuses on revisiting of SAARC by exploring the prospects for enhancement of regional economic co-operation among the SAARC countries while managing the Pakistan-India bilateral conflict. By adopting qualitative method and content analysis as technique, this research discovers supremacy of the Pakistan-India adversarial relationship as the vital cause for the reduced success of the SAARC.

The technique of In-depth Interviews of KIs has been adopted in this study. In-depth Interviews (IDIs) with KIs were conducted. The professional background and expertise of the KIs were reviewed carefully before conducting the IDIs with the KIs. Therefore, a purposive sampling method was used in this respect. In this regard, six industrialists each from Pakistan and India were interviewed for this study. Also, two industrialists from the SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry have been interviewed. Likewise, four journalists each from Pakistan and India have been interviewed. To seek an input and feedback from academia four academicians each from Pakistan and India have been interviewed. It is necessary to mention that interviews of KIs from Pakistan have been interviewed personally

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while KIs from India have been interviewed through e-mail and Skype. The details of the KIs have also been displayed in the Table 1.

Table 1 Data of Interviewees (Key Informants)

Interviewee	Pakistan	India	SAARC
Traders/ Industrialists	6	6	2*
Journalists	4	4	-
Academicians/Experts	4	4	2
Total	14	14	4

* Representatives from SAARC Chamber of Commerce & Industry

SAARC's Dilemma under the Prism of Regional Security Complex Theory

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) precisely explains SAARC's dilemma caused by the Pakistan and India bilateral conflict. According to Barry Buzan, RSCT is "defined by durable pattern of amity and enmity in the form of regional or geographical patterns of security interdependence. The specific traits of Regional Security Complex is shaped by historic factors such as longstanding enmity or cultural linkage to a specific geographical region" (Buzan & Waever, 2003). Bipolar conflictual power structure in South Asia resulting in "zero-sum notion of security" works always in Pakistan-India case creates complexes like 'we' and 'they' between Pakistan and India (Aminul Karim, 2015). This is blocking SAARC to emerge as an effective organization on regional basis. Therefore, Pakistan and India should adopt an approach, what Shahid Javed Burki quotes as "pareto optimality" (Burki, 2009).

Geopolitical interests of Pakistan and India have always barred them from active participation in the process of regionalization of South Asia. Barry Buzan defines RSCT as "a group of states where primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot reasonably be considered apart from one another" (Buzan & Waever, 2003). Geopolitical considerations of Pakistan and India have blocked successful functioning of SAARC and dashed the anticipated goals of regional economic integration of South Asia. Consequently, role of Pakistan and India in SAARC has been captive to their geostrategic pursuits. Therefore, Pakistan and India should assume regional viewpoint instead of pursuing "country-centric approach" to transform South Asia into a sustainable regional economic wedge. Indian policy towards its small South Asian neighbours mirrors the situation what Hedley Bull terms, as "the deepest fears of smaller units in the global system are their larger units" (Hedley, 1977).

Organizational Structure of SAARC

Having a cursory look at the SAARC Charter it appears that SAARC has been working almost in all areas relevant to its members except conflict resolution. In this regard, SAARC has a well-defined organizational structure to achieve

principles and objectives identified under its Charter as well as declarations announced after the Summits.

Over the years SAARC has been experiencing transformation despite maintaining continuous process of consensus building. With the inclusion of Afghanistan as eighth SAARC member the SAARC has a division to deal with the expansion of the organization. Also, SAARC has its financial scheme to contribute its expenditure. According to this scheme member states make financial contributions to the organization.

As far as structural hierarchy of the SAARC is concerned it has the annual summit meetings of the heads of state and governments, which place at the apex of the organizational hierarchy. Summit meetings are the decision-making authority in the SAARC. According to Article III of the Charter, the Heads of State or Government “shall meet once a year or more often as and when considered necessary by the Member States” (*SAARC Charter*, 1985). At these summit meetings generally heads of state or heads of government represent their countries and participate in it along with other high-level officials such as foreign ministers and foreign secretaries. During these annual summits leaders evaluate progress of the Association and recommend future directions. They approve various ideas for forwarding to the Secretariat to take proper measures through its various channels. The country hosting the summit meeting holds the Chair of the Association until the convening of the next summit. In the SAARC process all decisions are taken on the principle of unanimity.

Next in the hierarchy is Council of Ministers, comprising of Minister of External Affairs/Foreign Ministers of the member states. According to Article V of the Charter, the Council is responsible for formulating policies, reviewing progress, deciding on new areas of cooperation, establishing additional mechanisms and deciding other common matters relevant to wide-ranging interest to the Association (SAARC, 1985). The Council is supposed to meet twice a year and may also meet in an extra ordinary session provided that member states agree to it.

Next to the Council is the Standing Committee that is comprised of foreign secretaries of the member states. Its important tasks are to monitor and coordinate cooperation programmes, deal with finances and identify new areas of cooperation. It submits its reports to the Council of Ministers. There are also technical committees of experts that include representatives from member states and prepare projects in their respective fields and formulate work programmes. These Technical Committees make up the SAARC Integrated Action Programme. Having the status of consultative bodies, these Technical and Action committees do not have any decision-making powers. Rather, they may debate the ‘potential and scope of the regional cooperation in the agreed areas’ (Bailes, Gooneratne, Inayat, Khan, & Singh, 2007).

The SAARC Secretariat was established in Kathmandu, Nepal in 1987. The Secretary General, to be selected from member countries on rotational basis in an

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alphabetical order, is head of the Secretariat. As per the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the establishment of SAARC Charter and signed by the member states, “the role of the SAARC Secretariat shall be to coordinate and monitor the implementation of SAARC activities, and to service the meetings of the Association, and initiate proposals for regional cooperation, and preparation of projects for regional cooperation and identification of sources of funding” (SAARC Charter, 1985). The Secretary General, who is appointed for three years term on alphabetical order, holds responsible for coordination, monitoring and evaluation of the SAARC programmes assisted by the eight directors delegated by the eight SAARC member states (SAARC, 1986). The role of the Secretary General, to many scholars, has become more bureaucratic since its establishment instead of emerging as an effective force for regional cooperation (Bailes & Gooneratne, 2007). In the SAARC hierarchy the Secretary General is placed under the Standing Committee. Therefore, his executive powers are limited. This has curtailed any supranational element in the SAARC organization (Bailes & Gooneratne, 2007).

SAARC Secretariat has Directors of Working Divisions nominated by member states for a period of three years to work at the Secretariat. A director is in charge of a functional unit called as division. These directors perform their duties under SAARC Secretary General and manage programmes in various divisions. Frequent inter-divisional meetings, presided over by the secretary general, are held to ensure close interaction and coordination among these divisions. However, being representatives of their respective countries it is inevitable that a particular policy adopted by respective country may clash with an initiative sponsored by the SAARC Secretariat. And, in this way the very basic unit of the SAARC hierarchy i.e. working division becomes an impediment to SAARC’s progress to an effective regional cooperation among its member states.

There is an additional institutional layer for accelerating regional cooperation that is comprised of the SAARC apex recognized bodies. SAARC apex bodies are, in spirit, regional non-government organization (NGO) that works closely with the SAARC secretariat to help promote regional cooperation through people-to-people contacts. These institutions are registered with the SAARC Secretariat. However, there is no financial obligation for SAARC to support these apex bodies. Being one of the key apex bodies of SAARC, SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI) is considered as a part of an additional institutional layer for facilitating regional cooperation (Sáez, 2011, :. 91). The SCCI is an umbrella organization that brings together various chambers of commerce from members of SAARC. The primary task of the SCCI is to organize trade fairs, convene seminars, promote trade delegations and publish useful reports on economic cooperation in South Asia. Researchers like Lawrence Sáez have appreciated its lobbying work in fostering the development of the SAPTA (Sáez, 2011, :. 92).

Similarly there are a few other SAARC apex bodies, which include the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation in Law (SAARCLAW), the South Asian Federation of Accountants (SAFA), South Asia Foundation (SAF), the Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature (FOSWAL), and South Asia

Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC)(SAARC Charter, 1985). These associations have been helpful in promoting people-to-people contacts and giving expertise in their respective areas.

SAARC recognized bodies are the extra institutional layer in the SAARC, in addition to the SAARC apex bodies. These bodies are regional professional organizations that are registered with the SAARC Secretariat. Like SAARC apex bodies, SAARC recognized bodies also do not get any financial support from the SAARC secretariat. Objective of these recognized bodies is to play their role in cultivating cooperation as well as fostering coordinated regional action and consultation in key policy matters (Sáez, 2011).

Causes for Lack of Momentum of SAARC

Though SAARC has not been reflected as successful regional association yet it has generated seemingly endless supply of initiatives, summit declarations, communiqués and expert-committee reports (Sáez, 2011). However, SAARC has become hostage to Pakistan-India bilateral animosity since its inception in 1985. It was formulated with objective of economic integration yet it has not produced anticipated results due to the Pakistan-India conflict despite initiatives like South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA) 1993, and South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) 2004. Despite the fact that there are several institutional constraints, which have worked as barriers yet Pakistan-India conflictual relationship, has worked as a key stumbling block on the way to South Asian regionalism.

Internal Impediments

SAARC member countries established SAARC Secretariat to make the organization as an efficient. Secretary General, appointed by the member countries on alphabetical rotational basis, has to head the Secretariat for coordination among various institutional bodies. Likewise, SAARC Secretariat has Directors of Working Divisions nominated by member states. They perform their duties under SAARC Secretary General.

Some researchers, engaged in extensive research on South Asian regionalism, opine that the staff of SAARC Secretariat seems to be a barrier, to an extent, in initiating the policies considered as essential for regional integration. The SAARC Secretariat operates on consensus-based approach. Therefore, representatives of their respective countries especially the Directors of Working Divisions do not support an initiative sponsored by the SAARC Secretariat, which may clash with particular policy adopted by their respective countries.

Another important impediment to the progress of SAARC is lack of technical staff nominated by the member states. Rather diplomatic staff dominates the SAARC Secretariat that does not have technical expertise. Mitrany also speaks

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about important role of technical experts to accomplish the program of regional organization (Mitrany, 1944).

Often bilateral conflicts have resulted into the postponement of annual Summit meetings of SAARC and delayed implementation of its programmes not in all areas rather in selective areas. The scheduled 1989 SAARC Summit was postponed due to the then ongoing Sri Lanka-India conflict. Similarly, 11th SAARC Summit was postponed from 1999 to 2002 due to the post-Kargil episode in Pakistan-India relations. And, the 12th SAARC Summit had also been postponed from 2003 to 2004 due to Indian allegations against Pakistan for supporting cross border terrorism. Consequently, in roughly 30 years (1985-2015), SAARC has managed to organise twenty meetings instead of one per year.

On the basis of interviews of KIs, this study finds that SAARC has minimal role in enhancing economic cooperation between Pakistan and India because the Pakistan-India bilateral relationship dominates the SAARC and bilateral adversarial relationship is a key hurdle. Article 10 of the Charter of SAARC prohibits member countries to raise bilateral issues at the forum of SAARC (SAARC Charter, 1985). Therefore, Pakistan and India can play their role in making SAARC as an effective economic grouping instead of SAARC's role in enhancing Pakistan-India bilateral trade links. Also, implementations of SAARC declarations are another significant cause for lesser role of SAARC for integration of the region. India's bilateral issues with its neighbours are also working as barriers to make SAARC as an efficient regional economic block. Moreover, strict visa regime among SAARC countries may be another barricade to the emergence of SAARC as successful economic association. Figure 1 exhibit the issues that are holding SAARC back and these issues are not allowing SAARC to play its role in enhancing of economic cooperation between Pakistan and India.

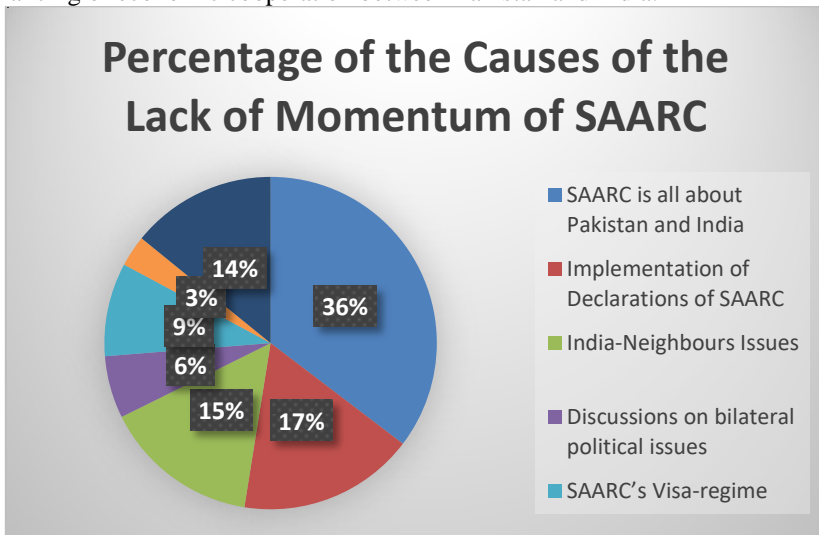


Figure 1 Factors in Percentage Causing the Ineffectiveness of SAARC
Source: Author's own calculation on the basis of interviews of KIs.

SAARC and Regional Economic Cooperation

The primary objective of the SAARC, according to Article I of the SAARC Charter is “to promote the welfare of the peoples of SOUTH ASIA and to improve their quality of life”. (*SAARC Charter*, 1985) To achieve this objective, along with other objectives mentioned in the charter, the SAARC leaders at its first summit meeting displayed their conviction about the benefits of regional cooperation in these words “that regional cooperation among the countries of SOUTH ASIA is mutually beneficial, desirable and necessary for promoting the welfare and improving the quality of life of the peoples of the region” (*SAARC Charter*, 1985). Therefore, SAARC, since its inception, had been taking appropriate measures for initiate and strengthen economic cooperation among its member states. However, it has not produced desired results due to multiple factors that have also been discussed in the previous section of this chapter.

The focus of this section is to investigate SAARC’s initiatives regarding fostering of regional economic cooperation with special focus to trade. During the formative phase, SAARC could not take concrete steps towards significant achievements owing to misperceptions of its member states about each other. However, it was able to take tangible steps for cultivating economic cooperation among the member states in the following years.

During the ninth ministerial meeting of the Council of Ministers held in Malé, Maldives, it was proposed that a high level committee on economic cooperation should be established that was named as ‘Committee on Economic Cooperation’. Keeping in view the necessity of institutionalization of economic cooperation the ninth meeting of the Council of Ministers held in Malé, Maldives a high level committee on economic cooperation named as ‘Committee on Economic Cooperation’ was established. The membership of CEC comprised of trade and commerce secretaries from all the eight SAARC member states.

One of the important contributions of the CEC is to recommend the idea of creation of an Intergovernmental Group (IGG) to formulate and seek government consultations regarding liberalization of trade in South Asia and enactment of rules under that specific trade regime. To several researchers on the subject of the SAARC, SAPTA and consequently SAFTA are the outcomes of this CEC.

The private sector also contributed towards promotion of regional economic cooperation among the SAARC member states. The key factor in this regard is the SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industries (SCCI) that was established in 1992. In the view of M.H. Syed, the SCCI was "instrumental in bringing into fruition the SAARC Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA)".

SAFTA was eventually signed on 6th January 2004 during the 12th SAARC Summit held in Islamabad, Pakistan. The Agreement became operational in July 2006, following ratification by all the SAARC member states. Under SAFTA, SAARC is supposed to gain its target of zero duties across South Asia while helping SAARC emerging as an Economic Union. However, the success achieved

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under the treaty has been quite limited while intra-SAARC trade has continued to be around 4 percent of the total trade of the region (Taneja, Ray, Kaushal, & Chowdhury, 2011). It has been claimed that one of the reasons for SAFTA being ineffectual, till date, is the large Sensitive (sometimes called negative) Lists maintained by member countries. However, member countries are purging these lists under an ongoing process. Nevertheless, to achieve the status of an Economic Union, there are stages such as customs unions that have to be achieved such before it. In terms of stages towards an economic union, SAARC has moved from preferential trade area to free trade area. However, it still needs to ensure the success of free trade in South Asia before proceeding towards a customs union in South Asia, and a common market. There are some obstructions to making of South Asia as free trade region such as impartial standards of goods and resolution of trade-related disputes. Lawrence Sáez has characterized SAFTA as undeniably the most important intraregional trade agreement in South Asia and is, arguably, the most significant achievement of SAARC (Sáez, 2014)(Sáez, 2011).

Economic cooperation under any bilateral or multilateral forum is an ever-evolving process. And, SAARC is no exception to it. A remarkable move is the creation of South Asian Forum (SAF) that was launched in April 2011 in New Delhi on the pattern of the World Economic Forum based in Davos, Switzerland (Ahmed, 2013). South Asian Forum is considered as South Asian version of the Boao Forum for Asia based in China and the Asia Pacific Roundtable based in Australia. The South Asian Forum aims to provide a forum to academicians, economic managers, public figures, business leaders, politicians and representatives of civil society from South Asia to deliberate on regional economic cooperation in South Asia. It is premature to say about the contribution of South Asian Forum yet it reveals willingness of the SAARC countries to adopt inclusive approach towards regional economic cooperation while taking into account diverse segments of society.

SAARC: An Assessment

In its almost thirty years of history, it is not realistic to believe that its achievements as a regional organization are a story of failure. During these years SAARC's performance has been mixed and its political leaders have met regularly particularly on informal discussions to address their mutual problems. These informal discussions produced some significant results in South Asia. The informal talks between the Indian and Pakistani Prime Ministers at the second SAARC Summit meeting at Bangalore in November 1986 led to the dilution of tension between the two countries on the issue of India's military exercise, operation Brass-tacks, on the Pakistan-India border. Also, the India and Sri-Lanka talks at the 1987 SAARC Foreign Ministers' meeting, leading to their accord on the Tamil problem. Similarly, in the wake of an informal meeting and discussion between Prime Minister of Pakistan and India, Nawaz Sharif and Narasimha Rao respectively, at Davos (Switzerland) in 1992, the Pakistani government took action

to prevent the move of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) to cross the ceasefire line in Kashmir later that year. The Davos meeting could only become possible owing to an earlier informal agreement between the two leaders at the sixth SAARC summit meeting at Colombo in December 1991. In this way SAARC, on several occasions, has displayed its expanding role. However, it would emerge as more vibrant regional economic organization provided that Pakistan-India bitter relationship becomes normalized.

One of the principal achievements that the SAARC has made during these years is recognition of the importance of process of an informal discussion. And, for the first time, that the Heads of State or Government at the Ninth SAARC Summit agreed that a process of informal political consultations would prove useful in promoting peace, stability, amity and accelerated socio-economic cooperation in the region. The leaders echoed this intent during their Tenth and Eleventh Summits held in Colombo and Kathmandu respectively (SAARC, 1998)(SAARC, 2002).

In an insightful assessment of pattern of regional cooperation among the South Asian countries under the frame work of SAARC, Lawrence Sáez quotes Shrikant Paranjpe who argues that SAARC “appears to have adopted the Nordic model of regional co-operation; that is, an avoidance of ‘constitutional approach’ an understanding that the national structure would remain the unalterable political basis for co-operation that would be directed to areas of relatively ‘low’ political content, and the exclusion of areas of ‘high’ political content (such as national security) from regional co-operation”(Sáez, 2011, :. 107).

Despite being the prey to critics regarding its efficacy, SAARC has been viewed among government functionaries and diplomats from South Asia as a respected organization (Sáez, 2011). While portraying emergence of SAARC as significant development, Kishore Dash has argued “its existence has certainly provided an opportunity for the policymakers, administrators, and experts to meet regularly and hold informal dialogues on bilateral and regional issues.” To him, “this practice of informalism and behind-the-scene discussions among the political leaders on various SAARC forums have helped contain many difficult situations and has contributed to the beginning of a process of confidence-building process in South Asia” (Dash, 1996). Underlining the substantial role of SAARC S. D. Muni proposes that without SAARC “the deterioration in the regional strategic environment would have been greater and moved faster” (Muni, 1985). On the other hand, Sumit Ganguly, a prominent analyst, notes that the SAARC’s Charter forbids member countries to discuss bilateral and contentious issues, and so tackling the aggravated subject of regional cooperation in counter terrorism is not entirely within its purview.

It is pertinent to mention that SAARC declarations, conventions and policies are an indicative to the fact that the Association has managed not only to develop consensus on non-controversial issues but has also implemented meaningful

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initiatives such as SAARC Food Bank, the South Asian University and SAARC Development Fund (Ahmed, 2013).

However, traditional animosity between the major powers of the South Asia has not allowed SAARC to move ahead with the pace required for earlier emergence of SAARC as an economic grouping. Rather, it has been, to greater extent, hostage to Pakistan-India conflict. It has been taking, since its inception, this bilateral conflict as baggage that is hindering its progress to real economic block. Therefore, it may be rightly said that normalization of Pakistan-India relations as well as diffusion of intensity of their longstanding conflict is a key to an overall progress and welfare of the one fifth of population of world living in South Asian region.

Reflections

Analysis of the data used in this research shows that Pakistan-India bilateral conflict is a key hurdle in augmentation of regional economic cooperation in the SAARC region. Therefore, increase in bilateral economic cooperation between Pakistan and India is an incremental step in making SAARC as an efficient economic block. Figure 1 displays the content analysis of the responses of the interviewees and shows that 35 percent out of the 100 percent responses consider that SAARC is all about Pakistan and India due to size of economies of both countries as well as leading military powers of South Asia. 17 percent have termed lack of implementation of SAARC declaration as the factors behind the failure of SAARC. Content analysis of the responses of the KIs reflect that 15 percent of the responses are related with India's contending issues with its neighbours are also responsible for the ineffectiveness of SAARC while 9 percent of the responses consider the strict visa regime among SAARC countries as an important barrier on the road to enhancement of economic cooperation in South Asia. Likewise, 6 percent of the responses are related with the inclusion of political issues in the discussions of the SAARC fora. Article 10 of the SAARC Charter does not allow SAARC members to discuss any political issue of bilateral conflict between SAARC countries in the SAARC meetings (SAARC Charter, 1985). However, 6 percent of the KIs opine that in the wake of maturity of SAARC in over thirty years' period, SAARC countries should discuss controversial political issues between them in the SAARC summits. SD Muni, Professor Emeritus, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi thinks "SAARC should open itself to political discussions more vigorously, at least at the summit level. It is politics that is holding SAARC." Because, according to him, "there are problems in SAARC beyond India-Pakistan relations as well. India still needs to be more accommodating and other smaller neighbours have to shed off their reservations on engaging with India more closely." Similarly, Saeed Ahmad, a researcher affiliated with National Institute of Pakistan Studies, Islamabad proposes to "enlarge the scope of SAARC now to include political issues."

Regarding the non-implementation of the SAARC declarations as barrier to effectiveness of SAARC, Imtiaz Alam, the president of SAARC Free Media Association, considers the implementation of the SAARC Declarations as the key to SAARC as feasible economic block and is of the view that

“SAARC can become a viable economic block just only by implementing SAARC Declarations. SAARC has very useful agreements at regional and bilateral level that provide basis to move forward. There is no implementation mechanism among SAARC countries. Now, SAARC has become a declaratory body.”

Similarly, Nisha Taneja, a professor/economic researcher at ICRIER New Delhi also urges the need to implement SAARC Declarations to move SAARC forward. She opines that SAARC can go forward by “implementing upon the declarations and discussions of the SAARC summits in a timed manner.”

Regarding the role of SAARC Visa regime as an irritant to regional economic cooperation in South Asia, an official from the Government of Pakistan recommends

“SAARC Visa regime should be made more effective regarding trade facilitations to the business community of the SAARC countries. The duration of SAARC Multiple Visa should be increased from existing three months to at least two years so that business community of the SAARC countries should get better facilities and intra-regional trade should be maximized.”

On the basis of viewpoints quoted in the above paragraphs it can be stated that SAARC has become hostage to the India-Pakistan conflict because these are the two major economies of South Asia. And, the future of SAARC has become conditional to the advancement of the Pak-India relations at the bilateral front. Also, it is noteworthy that SAARC visa regime should be more effective regarding trade facilitations to the business community to augment intra-regional trade generally and Pakistan-India bilateral trade especially.

On the other hand, secondary sources also reflect that SAARC has become hostage to Pakistan-India conflictual relationship and has not moved forward as desired regarding regional integration in South Asia (Taneja, Prakash, et al., 2013). For the process of integration in the SAARC region, Pakistan and India will need to implement extended trade liberalization but there are divergence of interests and strategic interest amongst them (Weerakon, 2010).

However, SAARC has provided an informal forum for the negotiation of significant regional cooperation challenges and without SAARC “the deterioration in the regional strategic environment would have been greater and moved faster (Sáez, 2011).

Conclusion

Bilateral economic cooperation between Pakistan and India and regional economic cooperation in South Asia from the platform of SAARC are two sides of the same coin. Both are interlinked to the extent that they are complimentary for each other.

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Additionally, Pakistan-India economic cooperation has greater prospects for spillover towards an increasing regional cooperation at the SAARC-level. And, enhanced economic connectivity between Pakistan and India would help improving South Asia's footing in world economy (Burki, 2009, Burki, 2011, Raihan & De, 2013). However, augmenting of regional economic cooperation has been captive, to great extent, to Pakistan-India antagonism. In the politico-economic milieu of South Asia, it is indispensable to address Pakistan-India conflict as well as moving towards cultivating of regional economic cooperation in South Asia concurrently. To augment intra-regional economic cooperation in South Asia it is appropriate to manage Pakistan-India conflict while transfiguring an overall nature of Pakistan-India economic relationship. Bilateral economic cooperation between Pakistan and India can be a correct method for augmentation of regional cooperation in South Asia. Subsequently, SAARC could emerge as an efficient economic alignment.

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